

Foxes, Chooks and the Path of Tears

A sermon on Luke 13:31-35 & Philippians 3:17 - 4:1 by Nathan Nettleton, 21 February 2016

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Message

Jesus is heart-broken when we refuse his call to gather with him in a place of powerlessness, vulnerable to the hostility of a power-hungry world.

Sermon

There seems to be a lot of tears in tonight's readings. Abraham is despairing over his infertility (Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18). The Apostle Paul says, "I tell you, *with tears*, about those who live as enemies of the cross of Christ." And although the gospel text we heard doesn't actually mention tears, Jesus's words of lament over the fate of Jerusalem certainly sound tear-soaked, and the story is often given the title of "Jesus weeps over Jerusalem".

I want to start with Paul's tears, and then come back to Jesus, because I think their laments may be quite similar. We tend to hear them quite differently, because Paul speaks of "enemies", and our culture has conditioned us to hear that word in particular ways. If they are enemies, they must be against us, and wishing us harm. But Paul doesn't actually describe them as our enemies, or even as enemies of Jesus. He is weeping over those who are "enemies of the cross". That might still sound like the same thing if you are used to thinking of the cross, as many are, as a kind of flag that Christians rally around. But Paul probably isn't thinking that way. He is talking about living in imitation of the example of Jesus, so he is almost certainly thinking of the cross as a way of life, a way of being, a way to be followed. So the "enemies of the cross" may even be fellow members of the church who are rejecting the way of suffering and self-sacrifice that we have seen in Jesus; just as the disciples did, repeatedly, as Jesus tried to tell them what lay ahead of him as he approached Jerusalem.

That certainly seems to be what Jesus has in mind in his lament over Jerusalem. "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!"

Jesus's choice of a mother hen as an image of himself is startling. It is the most obviously feminine image used for God in the Bible, but in our age of strong and powerful women, it would be easy to be distracted by that and miss the point he is making. This is anything but a powerful image. Jesus describes himself as a hen in the context of describing King Herod as a fox. When foxes and hens clash, the hen is never the winner. When Jesus speaks of gathering the people as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, we instinctively hear this as a protective image, and it is, sort of, but it is a far from promising protection. By gathering her chicks under her wings, the mother hen can stop the fox from picking them off one at a time without taking her first. But in reality, the only chance that her protection will save the chicks is that perhaps the fox will have had enough after feasting on the mother hen and won't come back for the chicks. Apparently mother hens are sometimes known to do the same thing in the face of a fire. Chooks have been found burnt to death after barnyard fires with live chickens still huddled under their charred wings, saved by their mother's self-sacrifice. The mother hen can't offer much promise that her chicks will survive, but be it fox or fire, she can say, "You'll have to take me first." That's the image Jesus is choosing for himself, for his mission in the world, and for the way that he would have us follow him in.

So perhaps the “enemies of the cross” that Paul weeps over are not those who hate Jesus or hate the church. Perhaps they are just those who cannot accept that God and God’s messiah might not be able to offer any more protection than a mother hen saying “You’ll have to take me first.” Perhaps they are just those who demand that God be powerful and triumphant, and who say we need strong armies, and guns in our handbags, so that we can strike down the evildoers and set the world aright “in the name of God”. Perhaps they are just those who demand that, instead of a mother hen with fragile wings, God must be a roaring “Lion of Judah” with rippling muscles and huge fangs before whom no fox will stand a chance. Remember in the book of Revelation when John the Seer was expecting to see the Lion of Judah on the throne, and saw instead a slaughtered lamb. Jesus keeps refusing our hopes for a powerful, all-conquering God who will vanquish our enemies and endorse our wars and crusades and put us on the thrones to reshape the world as we wish.

“Jerusalem, Jerusalem, city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!” Perhaps both Paul and Jesus are weeping over those who refuse to gather like a vulnerable brood under the wings of one who would obviously be killed, and who flee instead to gather with the latest lion or wolf, the latest strongman with a fiery message that promises whatever force might be needed to keep all the threats at bay and ensure that we are always on the winning side. The Pope was quite right this week when he said, in response to some of Donald Trump’s strongman rhetoric, that anyone who advocates building walls instead of building bridges is not following the way of Jesus. But the real Jesus is always far more likely to get himself crucified than get himself elected. We sometimes talk very romantically about the way of the cross but, in truth, it remains as impossibly unattractive as it ever was. When real, hardcore violence is threatening, who wants to walk into the face of it, without teeth or fangs or sword or guns, with arms spread wide, saying, “You’ll have to take me first”?

Actually, despite the fact that there is this small and fragile element of protection in the image Jesus uses, he doesn’t mention protection or shelter at all. He doesn’t say “I longed to protect you under my wings”, or “shelter you under my wings”. He just says “I longed to gather you”. “I have longed to gather you together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, but you were not willing!” This is probably significant, because the contrast between gathering and scattering is a frequent theme in Luke’s account of the gospel. Jesus wants to gather us to himself, but we have not been willing. Gathering close to the one who chooses to walk unarmed into the face of the fox doesn’t appeal. But when some strong man stands up and begins breathing fire against “illegal immigrants” and “queue jumpers” and “ne’er-do-wells”, cheering crowds gather in no time. That’s a call people will gather to. Which is very instructive. The calls that will most quickly gather a crowd are almost always calls to unite against a common enemy, against a perceived threat. And such gatherings almost always end up having a victim, one who is torn apart like a hen before a fox. People will readily gather to be on the side of the winner, perhaps almost without noticing that in doing so, they have condemned someone else to being the loser.

I’m not usually a critic of the present Pope. For the most part, Papa Francisco has modelled the way of Jesus far more clearly than any other pope in my lifetime. But I think even he fell into this trap a bit in the past fortnight. After his historic meeting with the Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church, they issued a joint statement that included a “defence” of the

church's traditional understanding of marriage. While the statement didn't explicitly condemn anyone, it said that "marriage ... between a man and a woman" "is a path of holiness" and "a school of love and faithfulness", and it went on to express "regret that other forms of cohabitation have been placed on the same level as this union". In the current climate of world-wide debate about same-sex marriage, it is impossible to hear that and not hear it as a rallying cry to unite the faithful against a perceived unholy scourge that threatens to undermine love and faithfulness. And the trouble is that when you can find ways of expressing it that only talk about what you are defending and manage to avoid naming or acknowledging those you are defending it against, you can easily dupe yourself into thinking that you have not attacked anyone, that you have not created any victims. But you have. Just because you don't see them or name them or feel their pain doesn't mean they don't suffer by what you have said or done. And notice how this happened in a context of seeking a new unity for two previously divided churches. Nothing unites like shifting your focus to a common enemy. Luke's gospel tells us that when Herod and Pilate joined forces in the plot against Jesus, they "became friends; whereas before this they had been enemies." (Luke 23:12) But when the fox is on the prowl, and the crowds gather to cheer him on, Jesus consistently takes the role of the mother hen, gathering the victims and exposing his breast and saying "You'll have to take me first."

I have no doubt that Jesus would be the first to want to gather the three great divided branches of his church – Catholicism, Orthodoxy and Protestantism – and reconcile them to one another, but Jesus will not do that in the way the world usually unites itself, by rallying them for a crusade against a common enemy. Jesus longs to gather them under weak and fragile wings in the place of vulnerability, in the place of solidarity with all who are rejected as unholy, unwelcome, unworthy, and therefore the enemies of all that is "decent and good".

"Jerusalem, Jerusalem, city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, but you were not willing!" Can you hear the lament, the tears, the depths of grief over those who Jesus loves and yearns to gather, but who refuse to go where he goes and follow where he leads. Perhaps only those of you who have watched helplessly as a loved one has plunged off down a path of self-destruction can really feel the depths of what Jesus is feeling here. However much you long to wrap your arms protectively around your loved one, and save them from the hell that they are creating for themselves, you can't make them accept your love or change their course. You can only, like Jesus, keep opening your arms and calling their name and weeping and praying.

Jesus won't force you or me or Donald Trump or Papa Francisco to follow him to the new gathering place on the pathway of defenceless and vulnerable love. But in his heart-breaking, aching desire to gather you into his loving arms, he won't stop calling you either, and in this season of Lent, that call comes right to the front. He won't stop calling you and he won't stop weeping and crying out in grief, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings. Will you be willing? Even now, will you be willing?"